DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 352 639 CS 011 137

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TITLE The Influence of Context, Community, and Culture: Contrasting Cases of Teacher Knowledge Development.
PUB DATE Dec 92
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference (42nd, San Antonio, TX, December 2-5, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; Classroom Research; *Cultural Context; English Instruction; Higher Education; Literature Appreciation; *Preservice Teacher Education; Professional Development; Secondary Education; *Student Teachers; *Student Teaching; *Teacher Behavior
IDENTIFIERS Educational Issues; *English Teachers; School Culture

ABSTRACT

A study investigated the importance of context, community, and culture in learning to teach. Two secondary English teachers in their first year of teaching were interviewed eight times before, during, and after their first year of teaching. Data also included participant-observation in each of 11 weekly student teaching seminars, non-participant observation of student teaching, written artifacts, and semi-structured interviews with cooperating teachers, principals, and students. Results indicated that the subjects found themselves situated among a number of cultures--the academic community, the English education community, cooperating teachers, and the adolescent community--cultures that provided them with conflicting views of English, of teaching, and of schooling. Findings suggest that: teacher candidates need regular opportunities to articulate and to develop their conceptions of teaching and learning; teacher education programs should promote community; and teacher educators must reconsider the importance of context in learning to teach. Future research, a longitudinal investigation, will focus on the developing attitudes and perspectives of one group of teacher candidates as they are inducted into the profession. (Thirty references are attached.) (RS)

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The Influence of Context, Community, and Culture: Contrasting Cases of Teacher Knowledge Development

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This paper was presented at the National Reading Conference, San Antonio, Texas, December 1992.

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The Influence of Context, Community, and Culture: Contrasting Cases of Teacher Knowledge Development

> [L]earning to teach is not a mere matter of applying decontextualized skills or of mirroring predetermined images; it is a time when one's past, present, and future are set in dynamic tension. Learning to teach--like teaching itself--is always the process of becoming: a time of formation and transformation, of scrutiny into what one is doing, and who one can become. (Britzman, 1991, p. 8)

Historically, educational researchers have described the process of learning to teach in terms of beginning teachers' observable behaviors or the skills needed for effective teaching (Carter, 1990). Recent investigations, however, have explored novice teachers' beliefs about teaching, their developing professional orientations, and their developing knowledge for teaching from an interpretive, critical stance (Britzman, 1991; Ritchie & Wilson, in press). Detailed case analyses and biographies which highlight the voices of teacher candidates, student teachers, and first-year teachers comprise much of the current body of research on learning to teach (e.g., Bullough, 1989; Bullough, Knowles, & Crowe, 1992; Grossman, 1990). Much of this research describes the experience of learning to teach as "a social process of negotiation rather than an individual problem of behavior," a process which is often situated in "a largely inherited and constraining context" (Britzman, 1991, pp. 8, 14).

Although Feiman-Nemser (1983) points to four somewhat

chronological phases which constitute the process of becoming a teacher, this article concerns two early phases: "pretraining" (including educational biography and prior beliefs) and "preservice" (including professional coursework and student teaching). We know that teacher candidates have "considerable informal preparation for teaching" long before they enter teacher education programs (Feiman-Nemser, 1983; Lortie, 1975). Individuals' personal beliefs and past histories in school affect both their conceptions of the role of the teacher (Britzman, 1986) and their professional orientations (Clandinin & Connelly, 1987; Nespor, 1987; Zancanella, 1991). In addition, we have learned that professional teacher education coursework has the potential to provide an occasion for prospective teachers to make the transition to pedagogical thinking, especially when preconceptions about teaching, learning, and subject matter are examined during these courses (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985; Grossman, 1991). Student teaching has been cited as perhaps the most powerful aspect of preservice education; however, student teachers are "marginally situated in two worlds," part student and part teacher (Britzman, 1991, p. 13). As they struggle for their own individual voices, student teachers must often negotiate among many contradictory realities and conflicting discourses of teaching and schooling.

Through my own work with beginning teachers, I have developed detailed, descriptive case analyses to provide an insider's perspective of the problematic process of learning to teach secondary English. The project reported here (drawn from a larger qualitative study) focused on the developing attitudes and

perspectives of the participants as they moved recursively and reflectively from English major to English teacher. From January 1990 through May 1991, I conducted qualitative case studies of five teacher candidates as they completed the final phases of their teacher education program in a large midwestern university; three of the participants were subsequently followed into their first year of teaching secondary English (Fox, 1991).

Research questions included: 1) How do the participants' define "English" as a discipline or subject for study in school? How do these definitions evolve over the course of the investigation? 2) How do the participants acquire knowledge about teaching? What are their reported sources of knowledge for teaching? 3) How successful are the participants in enacting their definitions of English in the classroom? This article focuses on two student teachers who for different, somewhat paradoxical reasons, experienced discord in their induction into teaching. The stories of Rob and Daniel (pseudonyms) represent and underscore the importance of context, community, and culture in learning to teach.

Method

Data-gathering methods included: 1) eight in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Patton, 1980; Spradley, 1979) with each participant at various developmental points before, during and after the student-teaching experience; 2) participant-observation in each of eleven weekly student teaching seminars (about 90 to 120 minutes each) where the participants discussed their responses to case studies of expert and novice English teachers, their observations of experienced teachers, and their own initial

teaching experiences; 3) non-participant observation in the participants' classrooms during student teaching; 4) the collection of written artifacts (e.g., participants' personal case studies, journals, lesson plans, class materials, and so on); and 5) semi-structured interviews with cooperating teachers, principals, and students--conducted as sources of triangulation. Formal and informal "member checks" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were used during the interviews and following the observations.

The interviews and the weekly student teaching seminar meetings were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Classroom observations (often audiotaped) were recorded by hand. All of the information concerning each participant was independently "consolidated, reduced, and interpreted" (Merriam, 1988) and brought together in case study data bases or case records (Yin, 1984; Patton, 1980). Analysis was based on the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). When certain patterns or regularities became apparent, categories emerged; the labels for the categories became empirical assertions (Erickson, 1986) such as, "Daniel sees the connection between literature and life as the main purpose for English." Categories which emerged from the initial interviews were continually compared with categories from the observations of both the student teaching seminar and the student teachers' classrooms.

Once an analysis of each individual case record was completed, a final case study for each participant was written. An identification of various recurring themes within each case

provided a means for cross-case analysis, and a comparative study of individual cases was written.

Summaries of the Case Studies

Rob: Transmission of Knowledge vs. Student Engagement

Two of Rob's most striking personal features were his intense energy and his sensitivity. A fourteen-year involvement with martial arts led Rob to a black belt in taekwon-do and some experience in teaching. He was clearly the most talkative member of the student teaching seminar group, often initiating discussions by reading from his journal or by asking a question. His sensitivity and caring became evident quickly: "I want to work with adolescents and their problems--drugs and the issues that surround that, students who think about suicide." Rob's interest in students seemed to thrive "outside" his classroom door. However seriously Rob might have taken the culture of the adolescent community, his students did not respond well to his literature lessons.

As a student teacher, Rob was assigned to a junior-high school of 1000 students in a midwestern university town of 63,000 residents. Most of the ten English teachers in this two-story, red-brick building did not have permanent room assignments. As Rob reported, the school itself was severely over-crowded: "I have students up on the window sills because we don't have enough desks, students on the floors, on tables--there's just not enough room."

In this context, Rob taught three periods of "regular" and

two periods of "honors" ninth-grade English, where the class size ranged from 22 to 30. About 20% of the students in the school were ethnic minorities, primarily African-American or Asian-American students. The curriculum for Rob's courses was generally prescribed by the school district: a unit on Of Mice and Men, a writing unit on the five-paragraph essay, a grammar review in preparation for the state-mandated standardized achievement tests, and a unit on a Charles Dickens novel. Rob chose Hard Times rather than the abridged version of Great Expectations which appeared in the literature anthology. During his student teaching experience, Rob's cooperating teacher gave him full responsibility for all five classes for approximately eight weeks.

Rob derived his definition of English primarily from his observations of his college English professors. He valued the formal analysis of what he called "classical literature" and viewed literature as history, emphasizing what he called "material" on authors' lives. Rob felt that his college English classes offered brief opportunities for his own personal response to literature but ultimately taught him the importance of analyzing literature "correctly": "It's always helpful when you've got some professor giving you guidance through [the novel]: this is what you should be looking for, this is a key point." Rob's definition of English was reinforced by his cooperating teacher who often conducted dramatic, teacher-centered class presentations.

As Rob reflected on his experiences, he entitled his personal case study, "I Had a Hard Time Teaching Hard Times so Please Don't Give Me a Hard Time." He assumed his ninth-grade students would be as motivated about the book as he was but soon discovered, "I was teaching the novel from hell!" His transmission model of teaching literature (quizzing students about the plot and "rushing" to cover the chapters) failed to engage his students, but he persisted because "it's one of my favorite books." Despite some experimentation with collaborative learning strategies (a suggestion from his fellow student teachers), Rob remained faithful to his initial approach, reflecting that he believed the problems stemmed from his own "presentation" of the book. Rob left student teaching somewhat frustrated, convinced that his problems were merely "technical." Because he did not receive the positive response which he expected from the adolescent community, Rob's enactment of his definition of English in the classroom was in a sense blocked.

Daniel: Connecting Literature to Students' Lives

Daniel loved jazz and the blues and rock and roll. His sense of idealistic optimism and individuality seemed to characterize his personality. He believed in recognizing and celebrating the diversity among his students. Daniel connected literature to his own life, reporting interest in authors Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson, James Baldwin, Gordon Parks, Langston Hughes, and "a couple of political newspapers." He even "lived" the literature he read, for he traveled in true "Kerouac" fashion

across country one summer. Good teachers, Daniel believed, are "excited about what they're doing" and "they transfer that over to students and help them see the connections between English--good literature--and their lives."

As a student teacher, Daniel was assigned to the same local junior-high school as Rob. Since Daniel's cooperating teacher moved to a new room only once each day, he felt he had some control over the classroom's physical environment. Often, he posted student writing on bulletin boards or shared his own writing by displaying his poetry on the chalkboard. When Daniel taught, he moved about the room freely, pausing occasionally to sit on a stool which was situated in the middle of the room. Working with his cooperating teacher as an instructional aide for six weeks prior to student teaching, Daniel continued to observe her classroom for eight additional weeks, assuming responsibility for five eighth-grade classes for only two weeks. This relegation to the role of observer frustrated him greatly.

The five classes of eighth-grade English ranged in size from 22 to 28. Even though the curriculum for the courses was generally prescribed by the school district, Daniel was allowed to develop a two-week unit on poetry. He created a "poetry packet" containing poems and activities which he thought eighth-graders would enjoy, but felt constrained by his cooperating teacher's guidance: "She reviewed everything with me on a daily basis and recommended things to me--and pulled things back. . . . I didn't feel I had much freedom in the way I could teach."

Daniel's definition of English centered on the connections between literature and life. He felt compelled to help students enjoy literature "for once in their lives," and he believed that students should influence and shape the curriculum for any course. His experience with student teaching seemed to complicate his definition of English, and when his definition clashed with his cooperating teacher's ideas and instructional priorities, he became discouraged. Daniel was troubled by what he called her "trivial pursuit, jeopardy, spit-out-the-answer" approach which seemed to be endorsed by the "system" and its state-mandated, standardized achievement tests. He empathized with his cooperating teacher ("I think some days my teacher doesn't know <u>what</u> her purpose is, and she's been teaching for 20 years") and lamented her struggle with "what she <u>had</u> to do" and "what she <u>would like</u> to do."

During class discussions, Daniel was eager to tell stories of his own life and encouraged students to do the same. "I want kids to see why English is important to their everyday lives--how picking up a good book can really <u>change</u> the way they think." Recalling his own school experiences, Daniel worried, "[Most teachers] don't make English real to the kids. English is never more than a class. It's not connected to their lives. And if students can see that it is, they'll enjoy it much more and know that it's important and meaningful to them." When students' connected their experiences to their reading, he felt pleased:

They really can see a lot of themselves or people they know

> in these poems. Kids were pretty open in discussing their problems in small groups. . . . Kids who normally sat in the outer corners of the room were actually reading the poems and expressing themselves in their responses.

Despite this brief period of success, Daniel left student teaching feeling disappointed, determined to rediscover the reasons he "enjoyed English so much" and find those "connections" between literature [or English] and life which he felt were lacking in his cooperating teacher's classroom. Daniel's enactment of his definition of English was also blocked.

Discussion

Drawing upon a number of sources of knowledge in learning to teach, student teachers participate as members of many different communities, cultures which may exist in harmony with one another or may clash and cause tension. Rob and Daniel found themselves situated among a number of cultures: the academic community, the English education community (including the student teaching seminar), cooperating teachers and other local school colleagues, and the adolescent community. Often, these sources--as well as other pressures such as prescribed curricula and state-mandated achievement tests--provided them with conflicting views of English, of teaching, and of schooling.

As Bullough, Knowles, and Crowe (1992) suggest, "Becoming a teacher is an idiosyncratic process reflecting not only differences in biography, personality, and in conceptions of teaching and how well or poorly they are developed, but also in

school and school-community contexts" (p. 187). However, like Bullough, Knowles, and Crowe, I do believe that we can enable novices to find their voices as beginning teachers as they negotiate among various conflicting discourses. How? We must reconceptualize and redefine teacher education.

First, teacher candidates need regular opportunities to articulate and to develop their conceptions of teaching and learning as well as their visions of English as a discipline and a subject for study in school. Even though Rob and Daniel began this process as participants in this study, these activities were not formal features in their teacher education program. Writing individual histories or personal autobiographies (Knowles & Holt-Reynolds, 1991) as well as reading and discussing case studies of other beginning teachers (Carter, 1992; Shulman, 1992) will enable novices to unpack their preconceptions and perhaps even reconceptualize or overcome them. Conducting classroom ethnographies and action research projects forces prospective teachers to develop personally-situated theories of learning and teaching (Kutz & Roskelly, 1991). All of these experiences should be regular features in teacher education coursework, enabling prospective teachers to begin to see themselves as knowledge-makers and knowledge-creators rather than knowledge-receivers (Fox, 1993).

Second, as prospective teachers work together in cohort groups, they begin to see the importance of the social construction of knowledge in teaching. Rather than promoting

isolation and individualism, teacher education programs should promote community. The student teachers in this study--particularly Daniel--pointed to the importance of the collegiality they shared with the members of their student teaching seminar group and repeatedly met together outside of the scheduled meeting time. Rob and Daniel did not experience such collegiality at the local junior-high school setting; the ten English teachers there had no such opportunities for the development of a school-based community. In order for teachers "to challenge current practices and to work for change" (Grossman, 1992), they must have time to talk, time to work together in order to determine their own needs and questions, and time to create conditions for change within their specific environments (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990).

Finally, teacher educators must reconsider the importance of context in learning to teach. Even though Rob and Daniel student taught in the same junior high, they encountered different tensions and reacted differently in individual contexts. Comfortable with his cooperating teacher's style (the familiar transmission model which he loved), Rob was amazed when the adolescents in his classes balked at his similar approach. In contrast, Daniel valued his eighth-grade students' positive reactions to his student-centered approach, but his cooperating teacher pushed him toward more "skill and drill" to prepare for state-mandated tests.

Building upon the themes of collegiality and school-

university partnerships and underscoring the importance of context in learning to teach, my school-based and university-based colleagues and I have conceptualized a study which will examine how teacher candidates' and experienced teachers' knowledge about literacy instruction at the secondary school level is acquired and modified over time (Hudson-Ross, Fox, & McWhorter, 1992). Based on the Foxfire model of teacher development and funded by the National Reading Research Center, this longitudinal investigation will focus on the developing attitudes and perspectives of one group of teacher candidates as they are inducted into the profession through carefully structured experiences that are guided by a team of school- and university-based practitioners. This research will be grounded within a localized community of teachers who are committed to educational reform and are working together in order to bring about change. In this supportive context, we seek to understand teachers' conceptions of literacy (as related to English and other content areas), their sources of knowledge for teaching, and their processes of professional development.

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